



# Living with Freud

Lilian Chee introduces several art installations displayed at the Freud Museum in north London. While each individually opens up further critique of Freud's practice and its cultural impact, collectively they measure the ability of objects to charge interior atmospheres with provocations of gender, modernity, ethnicity, objectivity and domesticity.



**Susan Hiller, At the Freud Museum, 1994**  
Installation view of a vitrine made as part of 'The Reading Room' project, commissioned by Book Works, London, which featured artists and writers in Glasgow, London and Oxford from March to May 1994.



**Susan Hiller, 'Sophia/Wisdom', From the Freud Museum, 1993**  
Prototype of a box containing waters collected at sacred sites in corked and sealed antique bottles. The prototype was later developed for Hiller's installation *At the Freud Museum* in 1994.



**Sophie Calle, 'The Wedding Dress', Appointment with Sigmund Freud, 1999**  
Curated by James Putnam, *Appointment with Sigmund Freud* displayed relics from Calle's own life among Freud's possessions.

Once the home and office of psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud, London's Freud Museum is a well-preserved collection that entices both the curious and the converted into its rooms. Here, the manner in which Freud's objects give enduring meaning to his spaces needs reiteration. Notably, the spatial framework for such objects, which include key pieces of furniture and antique figurines, has been painstakingly re-enacted; initially following Freud's move from Vienna, and subsequently, over time, by the present museum and its curators.

It is therefore unusual that the museum has enabled contemporary artists to reoccupy and reinterpret an almost sacred context through the provocative medium of installation art. These artistic interventions use Freudian-inspired objects as controversial levers to simultaneously affirm, challenge or complicate the interior's historical and cultural meanings.

Susan Hiller's *At the Freud Museum* (1994) comprised 22 brown, custom-made archaeological boxes, each containing a found or collected object, its pictorial representation, a text and a label. The work religiously encased 'beautiful, utilitarian, tedious, scholarly, macabre, rare, banal, eerie, and sentimental objects' in nondescriptive, miniature boxed interiors that Hiller doubly confined within an existing glass vitrine in Freud's bedroom.<sup>1</sup> The contents of the boxes, such as cow-shaped milk jugs, water from sacred sites sealed in antique bottles, a Ouija board, instruments and instructions for dowsing, and a Punch-and-Judy comedy scene, are all familiar in that they allude to Freud's possessions and his unusual collection of myths, jokes and dreams. Yet Hiller's boxed objects do not merely copy what is there. They raise abrasive views about gender, modernity, ethnicity, objectivity and domesticity.



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Sarah Lucas, *Hysterical Attack (Mouths and Eyes)*, 1999, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 2000

Also curated by James Putnam, this installation view shows the chair in Freud’s study. In the background, above Freud’s couch, is Lucas’ ‘*Prière de Toucher*’, a large photograph of the artist’s torso.

They are deeply unsettling because they manifest underlying questions of truth, fiction and mortality operating within a specific interior milieu that Hiller calls ‘the Father’s house’.

The box as a device for entering the Freudian milieu is important. It frames the objects within; that is, it gives the objects coherence and legitimacy. Perhaps not coincidentally, the scene of psychoanalysis is also commonly referred to as a ‘frame’ regulating duration, cost and spatial arrangement of the psychoanalytic experience. As we attempt to decipher Hiller’s objects through the double enclosures of the glass vitrine and cardboard box, we become conscious of the museum’s interior frame – its boundaries, highlights, stories and routes – and of how this frame conditions our vision and the visuality of Freud’s practice and spaces. Working through association, memory, fantasy, dreamlike states and, most importantly, narrative, we encounter the Freud Museum within Hiller’s box-set museum as a series of episodic inventions, whose frame of reference remains, at best, tenuous and imaginative.

As the proverbial site of the talking cure, Freud’s couch is a psychoanalytic icon. The shape of the couch also recalls the vulnerable, reclining body of the analysand. In Sophie Calle’s *Appointment with Sigmund Freud* (1999), a silk wedding dress is draped suggestively over the couch. The wedding dress is a garment linked to purity and virginity, and to a woman’s sexual coming-of-age. It is hauntingly also the last article of clothing a woman chooses to be dressed in for burial. Calle recasts the Father’s house as a repressed feminine space, whose foundations and knowledge are, in part, nurtured by frequently unnamed female patients who collaboratively constructed the discipline with their confessions and stories. Instead of perpetuating the stereotype of the female hysteric,

Calle’s choice of dress raises the problem of the female body as the object of consumption and derision. As the silk dress lies limp on the couch, it accentuates a complex memory of forgotten sitters – Bertha P, Anna O, Irma and Dora – whose identities are intricately bound to the father figure.

A different anthropomorphic memory is suggested in Sarah Lucas’ *Hysterical Attack (Mouths and Eyes)* (1999), where papier-mâché, tentacle-like and faintly feminine splayed tights-as-limbs sprout out of cheap, second-hand shop chairs. Lucas has wittily covered the chairs and their abject prostheses in magazine cutouts featuring either mouths or eyes, thus gesturing the importance of oral and scopic registers in Freudian sexual theories. More importantly, the chairs remember the bodies in this room as sexed – male, female; psychoanalyst, patient – and the power to see, be seen, to speak, or be spoken to as inherently gendered capacities within this plush space.

These artistic interventions enable us to negotiate the frame of Freud’s house by radically transforming our perception and encounter. Through them, these interiors embody our presence as much as they remember Freud’s past. □

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#### Note

1. Susan Hiller, *After the Freud Museum*, Book Works (London), 2000, unpaginated.

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